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Explained – The psychology of illusion in history writing

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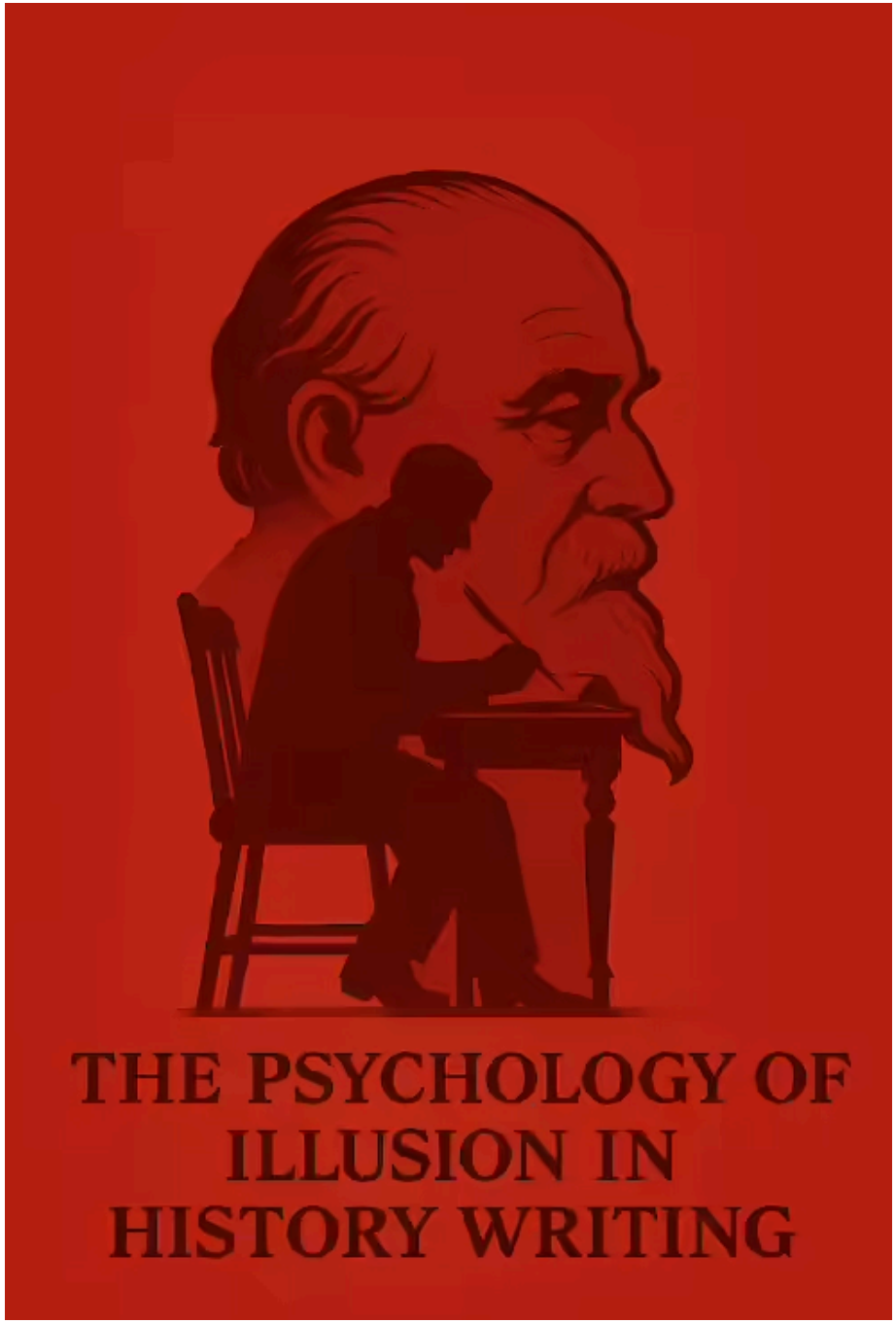

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Writing about the past is influenced not just by the data but also by the cultural frameworks and cognitive inclinations of historians and cultures around the world. In historiography, the "psychology of illusion" refers to the covert operation—memory distortion, narrative simplification, hindsight bias, and collective identity formation—that cause people and groups to create cohesive, morally clear of the past even when the historical record is more ambiguous. These illusions result from societal demands and common mental habits rather than intentional deception and decoded. Any genuine historian who is dedicated to critical investigation must comprehend them thoroughly.

EH Carr's What Is History? remains foundational for diagnosing such illusions. For him, historical facts only become "historical" when they are chosen and analysed by historians; they do not exist as neutral material that is just waiting to be gathered. According to him, there is a "continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts," which means that what is deemed relevant is shaped by the historian's values, interests, and intellectual environment. Carr's insight anticipates the psychological argument: illusions arise at the very moment of selection. What historians notice or ignore is shaped by cognitive predispositions long before

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interpretation begins. This realization is strengthened by contemporary psychology, which shows that 'memory is reconstructive' in and of itself. According to Frederic Bartlett (1932), people automatically modify new information to conform to cultural norms or mental "schemata." His "War of the Ghosts" experiment shows how retellings meander in predictable ways: story structure becomes more conventional, new supernatural aspects vanish, and causal gaps are filled. In historiography, this means that even professionally trained historians and scholars may impose familiar patterns—progress, decline, heroism—onto fragmentary evidence and construct the reality. The illusion is not intentional distortion but the mind's tendency to create meaningful wholes where the past is incomplete or ambiguous.

A second cognitive source of illusion is hindsight bias. Baruch Fischhoff's seminal 1975 study demonstrated that once individuals know an outcome, they systematically overestimate how predictable it was. Historical events thus appear inevitable only in retrospect. Daniel Kahneman (2002) later formalized this as part of the mind's "System 1" tendency to produce coherent narratives regardless of evidence. Historians, like all humans, are susceptible to this illusion of inevitability:

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the French Revolution appears destined once one knows the outcome; the fall of the Soviet Union seems obvious after 1991. Yet participants at the time lived amid uncertainty. Hindsight bias thus compresses contingency, reduces the range of plausible alternatives, and creates a false sense of clarity.

Further layer of illusion is introduced by the narrative itself. Historian Hayden White (1973) believed that the literary genres that historians use to emplot events—romance, tragedy, comedy, and satire—have an impact on historical writing and construction facts. The past is imposed with moral guidance, organization, and emotional tone by these tales. The consequence is significant: the narrative consistency that historians attribute to the past may not have existed. White does not claim that facts are invented; rather, he shows that narration enforces structure, creating an illusion that the events unfold with a logic intrinsic to them rather than imposed by the historian’s interpretive framework. Carlo Ginzburg (2013) similarly warns, in Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method, that while microhistorical inference can reveal hidden structures, it can also lead to overinterpretation when scant evidence is woven into seductive but unwarranted patterns.

Maurice Halbwachs argued that what we remember is shaped by the "social frameworks" we live in; memory is not a neutral store of facts but a shared, shifting way in which groups organise the past and define themselves. Pierre Nora's idea of lieux de mémoire—museums, monuments, anniversaries—shows how societies condense messy, contested histories into powerful symbols that feel natural and emotionally binding, even as they smooth over conflict and complexity. Nationalism sharpens these distortions. Benedict Anderson (1983) calls nations "imagined communities," held together by shared narratives, selective memory, and practices such as mass printing, mapping, and museum display. Though modern states are quite recent, their official histories work to present them as ancient, seamless continuities. Expanding on this, Partha Chatterjee (1993) contends that anti-colonial nationalisms replicate Western political paradigms while inventing a symbolic "inner realm" of cultural authenticity and moral virtue. In both imperial and anti-colonial contexts, nationalism depends on these mythic reconstructions—masking internal fractures, inventing cohesion where diversity once existed, and invoking idealized "golden ages" to justify present political agendas.

Romila Thapar argues that, in modern India, the past is often bent to fit present political needs. In her 2014 work, she shows how accounts of "ancient India" are selectively rewritten to back a seamless idea of a single Hindu nation, obscuring the region's historical plurality of languages, religions, and cultures. These narratives, she notes, rest less on careful use of sources than on emotions such as wounded pride, the desire for a stable identity, and the search for moral reassurance. The resulting myths acquire influence not through factual accuracy but through their capacity to resonate with deep-seated cultural sentiments and political aspirations.

These various strands—cognitive bias, narrative emplotment, collective memory, and nationalism—reveal that the psychology of illusion in history writing is multilayered which must be decoded by the historians. Illusion arises from the mental need for coherence, closure, and identity. History, however, is often discontinuous, ambiguous, and plural. The historian's task, then, is not to pretend that illusions can be eliminated but to cultivate reflexivity. As Carr advises, one must study the historian before the facts; as Thapar insists, one must critically assess the uses of the past; and as Nora warns, one must interrogate the symbolic landscapes in which collective memory is staged.

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Ashok
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Ancient India was a fascinating mosaic. Constantly changing and evolving. Later, migrations and invasions, British the most recent. Nothing was inevitable or preordained. My person al view is that the map of the subcontinent would have looked very different if the Battle of Plassey had not taken place in 1757. Religion an immutable fault line to those who might have wished for one magnificent sweep. Early on, Burma conveyed it wished to be completely different. Nor would Sri Lanka have been on board. Nepal came to a respectful understanding with the British, but no way they would have signed away their independence.

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